What Ever Happened to Sin?
Romans 7:18-19
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Phylis McGinley writes light and sometimes very witty verse. One of her poems, "Community Church", goes like this:

"The Rev. Mr. Harcourt, folks agree,
nodding their heads in solid satisfaction
Is just the man for this community
Tall, young, urbane, but capable of action
He pleases where he serves. He marshalls out
The younger crowd, lacks trace of clerical unction,
Cheers the Kiwanis and the Eagle Scout,
Is popular at every function.
And in the pulpit, eloquently speaks
On divers matters with both wit and clarity:
Art, education, God, the early Greeks,
Psychiatry, St. Paul, true Christian Charity,
Vestry repairs that shortly must begin -
All things but sin. He seldom mentions sin."

(Times Three, Selected Verse, P 134)

Miss McGinley, I fear, has hit the proverbial nail right on the head. Mr. Harcourt seldom mentions sin; nor do very many of his collegues of the cloth, nor does the church, nor does anyone else for that matter. Sin, currently, has a very poor press and most people, it would appear, are rather glad of the fact. After centuries of making people feel guilty the church has fallen silent; After centuries of bending under the burden of original sin and total depravity, mankind has thrown it over and discovered that its O.K, to feel O.K.; that freedom is ~~better~~ than guilt and that while some

of the good things in life may still be fattening, they are no longer always illegal or immoral. Blessed freedom has arrived for guilty, despairing, self-effacing men and women. Hallelujah!

And yet, strangely, people have not stopped feeling quilty, There has been no marked increase in personal happiness: peace of mind seems more elusive than ever: there are not enough psychiatric couches to go around. And more to the point, there is a growing sentiment among behavior scientists that we may be doing ourselves grave disservice by simply elliminating from our vocabulary and our categories of self understanding any concept of sin. Besides, sin is obviously alive and in the best of health. Justice Potter Stewart confessed that he might not be able to define pornography but he recognized it when he saw it. So, I would submit, any rational person might confess about sin. We may not know what it is! We may be embarrassed by the way our fathers described it: we may react cooly to the traditional "hell-fire and brimstone" pulpit performance: we may not be willing to revert to the guilt-inducing systems of the past. But from a purely pragmatic posture we must, it seems to me, acknowledge that something is wrong with the status quo, that people still feel quilty, that human behavior - with alarming regularity - can only be described as bad, evil, sinful if you will.

Thus, a three part series of sermons on Sin: beginning today with an overview and an attempt to discover what happened to it, and then proceeding in subsequent weeks to an understanding of sin in terms of pride and sloth.

* the story of the Fall,

But, first, what is it? What is Sin? In the third chapter of Genesis, the Bible asserts that there is a fundamental fracture between God and man: another way of putting it is that man never quite lives up to his potential. Man is, that is to say, separated from his true self. The outcome, of this situation, in Biblical terms, is that people don't

get along very well. The fracture between man and God, man and self, rather quickly expresses itself between man and man. The first repercussion of "Paradise Lost", you will recall, is that Cain murdered his brother.

Now, for a lot of us, its been a long time since we took that story very seriously. We concluded long ago that Genesis is not history, that the garden of Eden is a myth and Adam and Eve the creations of a very fertile ancient poetic imagination. That takes care of Genesis: let us learn our anthropology from Mr. Darwin. Trouble is, we learned our theology from the eminent scientist; cheerfully ignoring the fact that "ad ham" means "man" and Eve, "woman" and that the biblical intent is not, and was not, to teach biology but theology; and futhermore that apart from the question of historicity, what happened to Adam and Eve happens to a lot of people with alarming regularity, maybe even all people: and that we still are seeking for a paradise that is lost.

Socrates, no superficial observer of the human animal observed that "Men know what is good but do what is bad." Ovid, the Roman Poet, may or man not have read Socrates, but in any event he did say, "I perceive the better and approve of it but I follow that which is worse." And the psycho-analytic school has been teaching for nearly a century now that human motivations are a mixture of love and hate, and that there are both conscious and unconscious structures in the human personality. All of which supports but does not improve St. Paul's candid confession, "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it." (Romans 7:18)

Ever since the human intellect has been turned to the investigation of human behavior, men of intelligence and candor have concluded that something is wrong. It has been called by different names, but allow for the

moment that the Church has not been totally out of touch when it has retained the three letter ~~formulation~~ word "sin".

What ever happened to it? First, the religious definition of sin became superficial and finally irrelevant. Defining what is and what is not a sin has been a difficult task at best. But just at the time that behavior science was probing the unknown of human motivation; and just at the time that real progress was being made in understanding ~~at least why people act the way they do~~ that there are dark + irrational areas of the human psyche, American Protestantism was busying itself railing against drinking, smoking, dancing, card playing, having fun on Sunday, etc. etc. at infinitum.

Lawrence S. Kubie, a leading voice in the psychoanalytic movement wrote, "The concept of Sin has fallen into disrepute precisely because it has failed to help people to change and by failing has betrayed human aspirations and culture". (Karl Menninger, Whatever Became of Sin? p 47)

That is to say, popular Christianity failed to take sin seriously enough. Just at the time the psychiatrists were suggesting that there really is something to this matter of sin, the Christian pulpit was coming down hard on its list of ~~petty~~ favorite vices. And it doesn't take much theological erudition to conclude that if there is something wrong with the human condition, it manifests itself in more substantial ways than the choice of wine instead of Kool Aid. Thus a lot of people concluded that the Church, epitomized in the voice of Protestant piety, was simply irrelevant on the subject of sin, which it was and is.

A more complex and helpful investigation has to do with our culture.* Dr. Menninger observes that "as a nation we officially ceased sinning some twenty years ago." (p 15) It was at that point that the word "sin" stopped appearing in Presidential proclamations. He refers to an article in Theology Today which observes that "since 1953, no president has

* © Dr. Karl Menninger, founder and chairman of the Menninger Foundation, has written a superb and very readable book on the topic, from which I have rather blatantly borrowed the title of this sermon.

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mentioned sin as a national failing. The Republicans referred to the problems of 'pride' and 'self-righteousness'. The Democrats referred to 'shortcomings'. But none used the grand old sweeping concept of sin. I cannot imagine a modern President beating his breast on behalf of the Nation and praying ('God be merciful to us sinners') though experts agree this is one of the best ways to begin." (Ibid. p 14-15)

Centuries before American Presidents eliminated the word, however, the process had begun. In the Middle Ages the responsibility for dealing with misbehavior was transferred from Church to state. Most sins became crimes. Sins could be repented of and forgiven but crimes had to be punished and they were punished, indeed, with a vengeance. Menninger calls it the "punitive ritual" and describes how shockingly cruel and hopelessly ineffective the system was. The American Indians, for instance, expressed surprise at this race of people who whipped their children as punishment for wrong behavior. In any event, sin became crime and the response of society to crime was to punish it. The punishments became very cruel and finally a reaction set it - a good one. Human compassion softened the idea of reprisal and instead of cutting off the hands of a thief we began to ask why the person had stolen. The behavior sciences came into being and a lot of healthy movements and humanizing institutions were born in our culture. But at the same time, sin which had become crime, was now becoming the symptom of a sickness. Less and less were people thought to be responsible and accountable for their behavior.

Nowhere is the irony of that transition more eloquently expressed than in the song from the Broadway Musical, West Side STory, "Gee, Officer Krupke".

"O, Officer Krupke, you've done it again.

This boy don't need a job, he needs a year in the pen.

It ain't just a question of misunderstood:

Deep down 'inside him, he's no good!"

Now, we must be careful here: no one who is sensitive wishes to return to the "punitive rituals" of the past. In fact, we need to accelerate our investigation into the "why's" of human behavior - and to keep humanizing the institutions we have established to deal with crime.

Unfortunately, the transition did not help people deal with their stubborn guilt; nor did it resolve St. Paul's dilemma of willing what is right but doing what is wrong. Nor has any of it caused people to behave better. The old deadly sins seem to be doing rather well with some ingenious contemporary variations.

Consider stealing or cheating. No one would disagree that it is wrong, bad, harmful, sinful. In 1969 four billion dollars worth of goods were stolen, not by professional theives, but by employees from their employers. The Chicago Sun-Times did a study which revealed that 72 per cent of the department store employees, 82 per cent of the bank employees and 86 per cent of the truck drivers tested were involved in some stealing from their employers.

Menninger observes that "No one would faintly suggest that 72 per cent of store employees or 83 per cent of bank employees are sick because they pilfer. Almost no one is charged: no one is convicted. Obviously these are not criminals. What is this, then, I would ask, other than clear, typical unadulterated sin? What else can you call it?" (Ibid. p 158)

A Cornell University study showed that "the average child of ten in the United States has already developed a noncondeming attitude toward cheating". (Ibid. p 159) The tragedy is that the average child of ten has learned that from his average parents.

One need only read the newspapers to document the reality of sin - wrong doing: from the flouting of the laws of the land by the government itself to major corporations which simply ignore the Supreme Court to the millions of individuals who will lie to the government or on before April 15. Sin has never been healthier, and its robust state of health is due

and regard it simply as a normal, American thing to do.

in large measure to the fact that we have made our peace with it, and will wink and look the other way.

A lot of people are concerned about the state of our morality.

Dr. Menninger suggests that the healthiest thing we could do would be to reaffirm sin as a reality: to acknowledge it, feel ashamed of it and confess it: corporate, group sin and individual, personal sin. Not abstract, theoretical sin, but the actual behavior which pains, harms, destroys my neighbor or myself: actual behavior which causes me to be less than I was created to be and which stands between God and myself.

For not only is our easy acceptance of sin pulling us apart as a nation, it hurts personally. Professor Hobert Mowrer, a psychologist, wrote, "So long as a person lives under the shadow of real, unacknowledged and unexpiated guilt he will continue to hate himself and suffer the inevitable consequences of self-hate. But the moment he begins to accept his guilt and his sinfulness, the possibility of radical reformation opens up: and...a new freedom of self-respect and peace..." (Ibid. p 195)

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is about the love and forgiveness of God. But if a person is feeling guilty, and there is no way to confront and confess that guilt, the Good News of God's love will not be heard. The First Epistle of John puts it plainly: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."

In the final chapter of his book Dr. Menninger speaks a personal word to Ministers and advises them how to help their people. Listen to his words: let me borrow them so thoroughly that they become my words to you.

"What have you done this week to hurt your neighbor, your sister, your wife? | What have you done to hurt yourself? | What have you done to hurt this church or the ideals for which it stands? | What have you done to hurt this city, this land, on which we live? | What have you done this week against the interests of the next generation? What have you left undone for the suffering, damaged, polluted, exploited earth and its hungry, miserable, exploited population? (Ibid. p 196)

What you and I need most from our religion is not a pat on the back, and the easy assurance that God will love us regardless of what we do. | What we need most is hope: | hope that we can be better and the world can be better. | Our religion teaches that God does not ignore sin, but forgives it: | that hope and peace and freedom are gifts given to us when we acknowledge who we are and what we have done | . . .

(*) →

Will you excuse my presumption ~~therefore~~, if I invite you to examine your life, | to acknowledge your wrong doing, | to ask God to forgive you, to forgive yourself, and then to take up the tasks of life on a better, more solid, more honest footing? Amen.

Father, give us integrity. Forgive us for the many ways we have failed to be the people you created us to be. Help us to forgive ourselves and to live lives that are pleasing in your sight: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

(*) Will you excuse my presumption, therefore, if I suggest that you and I will benefit by the Christian understanding of the basic human dilemma and the classic method of dealing with it?